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Health Officials Remind Residents to Avoid Contact with Animals Acting Sick or Aggressive

Call Local Animal Control, Seek Immediate Medical Attention if Bitten

State Public Health Veterinarian Dr. Colin T. Campbell reminds everyone to vaccinate their pets and avoid contact with stray and wild animals, especially those that appear sick or are acting aggressive because they may have rabies.

"Animals infected with rabies may act very aggressive and attempt to attack people and their pets. Anyone who sees a suspected rabid animal should avoid contact with the animal and call animal control or the local police immediately for assistance, once they are safe from attack," said Dr. Campbell.

Rabies is a deadly disease caused by a virus found in the saliva of a rabid animal and is transmitted by a bite, scratch or contact with infected saliva via exposure to an open cut or wound. Symptoms can develop anywhere from 12 days to six months after a bite. Symptoms include fever, headache, weakness, and discomfort at the site of the bite, before signs of mental impairment and encephalitis begin.

Rabies occurs most often in wildlife, particularly raccoons, bats, skunks, groundhogs, and foxes. These animals represent 92% of the cases in the U.S. In New Jersey, cats account for the vast majority of domestic animal rabies cases. Approximately 65 animals have tested positive for rabies in the state so far this year, including two coyotes this month in Bergen County.

If your pet is bitten by a potentially rabid animal, call your veterinarian immediately and report the bite to your local health department.

"Rabies cases in humans are rare and the preventative treatment is 100 percent effective if given promptly," Dr. Campbell said. Treatment is a dose of rabies immune globulin and a series of 4 rabies vaccinations over 14 days. Once an individual develops rabies infection and is exhibiting symptoms, it is nearly always fatal. To protect yourself and your pets from rabies:

- Vaccinate your pets against rabies
- Do not feed or touch wild animals
- Avoid contact with strays or pets other than your own
- Report unusual behavior in stray or wild animals to municipal animal control
- Report all bites immediately to your local health department

Individuals who have been bitten or attacked by an animal should take the following precautions:

- Wash the wound immediately with plenty of water and soap
- Learn as much as you can about the animal. If the animal is with an owner, get the owner's name and address. If it is a wild or stray animal, look to see if there are any features that will allow you to identify it later on. If possible, safely capture the animal and confine it and call your local animal control officer
- Contact your physician or local emergency room for wound care and consultation about the need for rabies preventative treatment
- Report the incident to your local health department

For more information about rabies, please visit: nj.gov/health/cd/documents/faq/rabies_faq.pdf

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